

Counseling “Conrad”: Movie “Ordinary People”

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Two goals of Freudian psychoanalytic therapy are to make the unconscious conscious and to strengthen the ego so that behavior is based more on reality and less on instinctual cravings or irrational guilt (Corey, 2015, p.67), “for only then can an individual exercise choice” (Corey, 2015). According to Freud, our behavior is determined by irrational forces, unconscious motivations, and biological and instinctual drives as these evolve through key psychosexual stages in the first six years of life (Corey, 2015, p.59).

In the movie “Ordinary People” (Redford, 1980), Conrad appears to be suffering from depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder due to the drowning incident where he witnessed his brother drown. He feels guilty that he allowed his brother to die and did not seem to do enough to save his brother, and that has led him to commit suicide. He also seems to be suffering from Borderline Personality Disorder “characterized by instability, irritability, self-destructive acts, impulsive anger, and extreme mood shifts” (Corey, 2015, p. 82). A cure for Conrad will be “based on uncovering the meaning of symptoms, the causes of behavior, and the repressed materials that interfere with healthy functioning” (Corey, 2015). I will need to explore with Conrad some of the questions like:

“What did you do when you felt unloved?” “As a child, what did you do with your negative feelings?” “As a child, could you express your anger, hurt, and fears?” “What effects did your relationship with your mother and father have on you?” “What did this teach you about women and men?” Brought into the here and now of the transference relationship, I might ask, “When have you felt anything like you felt with your parents?” (Corey, 2015, p. 86).

The challenge is to help Conrad “see connections between his present problems and early experiences in his childhood (Corey, 2015, p. 86).

Jungian therapy, or analytical psychotherapy, emphasizes helping clients to achieve wholeness and self-realization, with the therapeutic goals of self-knowledge, reintegration, and individuation (Tan, 2011, p. 104), “by focusing on helping clients not only to make the unconscious conscious but also to integrate the unconscious with the conscious so that they can become more whole persons in the process of individuation, or becoming one’s own unique person” (Tan, 2011, p. 111). This is the overarching goal of Jungian therapy: the individuation of the client (Tan, 2011, p. 111). To achieve this, Jungian therapists use therapeutic techniques or interventions using an analytical psychology approach like “analysis and interpretation of transference and countertransference, dream analysis, and active imagination” (Douglas 2008 as cited in Tan, 2011, p. 114).

Conrad’s friendship with his brother's friends even after his brother passed away, his longing for his mother’s affirmation, his feeling guilty about his brother’s death all point to a lack of individuation in Conrad. And as per the Jungian psychoanalytical theory, this is the result of his unconsciousness and collective unconsciousness, “that aspect of personality in which thoughts, feelings, experiences, and perceptions that the ego has screened out of conscious awareness are stored below the level of consciousness (Tan, 2011, p. 106). As Conrad’s therapist, I will use the technique of active imagination, which will enable Conrad “to connect the unconscious and the conscious layers of his mind in constant dialogue (Tan, 2011, p. 101). This intervention will enable “the ego as the center of consciousness to connect” (Sharf 2008 as cited in Tan, 2011, p. 117), with the collective and the personal unconscious thereby enabling “insight and growth and eventual individuation and self-realization” (Vitz 1994 as cited in Tan, 2011, p. 105) for Conrad.

Adler was the first systemic therapist: he maintained that it is essential to understand people within the systems in which they live (Corey, 2015, p. 99). Further, “Adler emphasized the unity and indivisibility of the person and stressed understanding the whole person (Corey, 2015), in the “contexts of family, culture, school, and work” (Carlson & Johnson, 2016 as cited in Corey, 2015). Adler’s theory starts with a consideration of inferiority feelings (Corey, 2015, p. 99), which motivates human beings “to strive for mastery, success (superiority), and completion (Corey, 2015). Encouragement is the most powerful method available for changing a person’s beliefs, for it helps clients build self-confidence and stimulates courage (Corey, 2015, p.105). This is accomplished by increasing the client’s self-awareness and challenging and modifying his or her fundamental premises, life goals, and basic concepts (Dreikurs, 1967, 1997 as cited in Corey, 2015, p.104).

In the movie “Ordinary people” (Redford, 1980), some of the mistaken self-defeating perceptions Conrad has reached are: “I could not save my brother, and his death was my fault”, “because, I could not save my brother, I have no right to live”, and “I am unable to connect with my mother and it must be my fault”. As an Adlerian counselor, I will place value on exploring early recollections of Conrad as a “source of understanding his goals, motivations, and values” (Corey, 2015). I will not pay a great deal of attention to Conrad’s past, “except to show him the consistency between his past and present as he moves toward the future” (Corey, 2015). I will create a lifestyle assessment to “explore with Conrad his social relationships, his relationships with members of his family, his work responsibilities, his role as a man, and his feelings about himself” (Corey, 2015). This will help me uncover Conrad’s “inferiority feelings” and “private logic” based on which he is living life. This will be followed by encouraging Conrad to see new alternatives and make new choices.

The Person-Centered approach emphasizes clients' abilities to engage their own resources to act in their world with others (Corey, 2015, p. 171) and so, therefore, “rejects the role of the therapist as the authority who knows best and of the passive client who depends on the therapist’s expertise” (Corey, 2015). Rogers maintained that three therapist attributes create a growth-promoting climate in which individuals can move forward and become what they are capable of becoming: (1) congruence (genuineness, or realness), (2) unconditional positive regard (acceptance and caring), and (3) accurate empathic understanding (an ability to deeply grasp the subjective world of another person) (Corey, 2015, pg. 170), and “that no other conditions were necessary” (Corey, 2015) for a “constructive personality change” (Corey, 2015) to occur. The cornerstone of Person-Centered theory is the view that clients in a relationship with a facilitating therapist have the capacity to define and clarify their own goals (Corey, 2015, p.171).

In the movie “Ordinary People” (Redford, 1980) Conrad’s self-perception is that he is responsible for his brother’s death. He is blaming himself and feels guilty to the point that he tried to commit suicide. Clients like Conrad are in “a state of incongruence; that is, a discrepancy exists between their self-perception and their experience in reality” (Corey, 2015). I will create a “supportive, trusting, and encouraging atmosphere”, (Corey, 2015), to help Conrad “learn to be more accepting of himself, with both his strengths and limitations” (Corey, 2015). “He can explore how he feels judged” (Corey, 2015, p. 187) by his mother for his brother’s death. He has an opportunity to express his feeling of guilt for not living up to his parent's expectations and his feelings of hurt over not having ever felt loved by his mother and felt wanted. Conrad “seems to have sufficient anxiety to work toward these desired changes” (Corey, 2015), to achieve a greater degree of independence and integration to cope with problems.

A basic existential premise is that we are not victims of circumstance because, to a large extent, we are what we choose to be (Corey, 2015, p.133). However, human beings can live what therapists would call "a restricted existence" (Corey, 2015) because the "clients have a limited awareness of themselves and are often vague about the nature of their problems" (Corey, 2015). Therefore, existential therapy grew out of a desire to help people who "feel trapped, helpless and stuck" (Corey, 2015), and "engage the dilemmas of contemporary life, such as isolation, alienation, and meaninglessness" (Corey, 2015). Existential therapy, then, "is best considered as an invitation to clients to recognize the ways in which they are not living fully authentic lives and to make choices that will lead to their becoming what they are capable of being" (Corey, 2015). The crucial significance of the existential movement is that it reacts against the tendency to identify therapy with a set of techniques. (Corey, 2015, p.137).

As an existentially oriented therapist, I would begin with understanding the subjective world of Conrad to help him come to new "understandings and options" (Corey, 2015, p.147). I will help Conrad see his anxiety, aloneness, and guilt not as something negative, but as a vital part of living with uncertainty and freedom. I hope to help Conrad discover his centeredness and live by the values he chooses and creates for himself (Corey, 2015, p.147). Further, I will help Conrad, "increase his self-awareness so that he can decide for himself the future direction of his life" (Corey, 2015, p.155). I will counsel Conrad with the assumption that he has the capacity to come out of his isolation and the guilt he feels for his brother's death. By doing so, Conrad can become a more substantial person and come to appreciate himself more. "When he does, the chances are lessened that he will need to secure approval from his parents" (Corey, 2015), particularly his mother. In a supportive and firm manner, I reaffirm to Conrad that he is now "entirely responsible for his life, for his actions, and for his failure to take action" (Corey, 2015).

Gestalt therapy is an existential, phenomenological, and process-based approach created on the premise that individuals must be understood in the context of their ongoing relationship with the environment (Corey, 2015, p. 199). Polster and Polster (1973) developed the thesis that “power is in the present” (Corey, 2015, p. 204), which reveals the emphasis of the Gestalt approach that is “learning to appreciate and fully experience the present moment (Corey, 2015). Focusing on the past and the future can be a way to avoid coming to terms with the present (Corey, 2015, p. 204). Clients are expected to do their own seeing, feeling, sensing, and interpreting, as opposed to waiting passively for the therapist to provide them with insights and answers (Corey, 2015, p. 200). A basic assumption of Gestalt therapy is that individuals have the capacity to self-regulate when they are aware of what is happening in and around them (Corey, 2015, p. 200). Therefore “therapists clearly attend to a basic goal—namely, assisting the client to attain greater awareness, and with it, greater choice” (Corey, 2015).

In the movie “Ordinary People” (Redford, 1980) Conrad is manifesting, “unexpressed feelings such as resentment, rage, hatred, pain, anxiety, grief, guilt, and abandonment” (Corey, 2015), which according to Gestalt theory is because of the *Unfinished Business* of the past. Therefore, as Conrad's therapist, I will help him re-experience past *Unacknowledged Feelings* about his mother and his brother's death, so that Conrad can move forward and become *Present-Centered*. He can then respond to them “from the place where he feels the most confusion or pain” (Corey, 2015). I will also help him realize the cardinal introjections that he is carrying which is, “I’m guilty of my brother’s death, and it would be better if I did not exist.” I will help him with the process of *re-owning* parts of himself that have been disowned due to the death of his brother and the lack of love from his mother so that the unification process can help Conrad become able to “make informed choices and thus live a more meaningful existence” (Corey, 2015).

Choice theory is the theoretical basis for reality therapy (Corey, 2015, p. 313) “which provides a delivery system for helping individuals take more effective control of their lives” (Corey, 2015).

The choice theory explains that every “behavior is purposeful because it is designed to close the gap between what we want and what we perceive we are getting” (Corey, 2015). Further as per Choice theory these behaviors of clients “are caused by their inability to connect, to get close to others, or to have a satisfying or successful relationship with at least one significant person in their life” (Corey, 2015). Therefore, “Reality therapy consists mainly of helping and sometimes teaching clients to make more effective choices as they deal with the people, they need in their lives (Corey, 2015, p. 315). The primary emphasis is on what the client is doing and how the doing component influences the other aspects of total behavior (Corey, 2015, p. 315).

In the movie “Ordinary People” (Redford, 1980) Conrad exhibits major symptoms like depression, anxiety, inability to sleep, and other psychosomatic symptoms. Since Reality therapists believe that the underlying cause for all symptoms is their difficult relationships, I will begin by asking Conrad about his relationships. I will learn that Conrad has an unsatisfying relationship with his mom and a guilt-based relationship with his parents because of what happened to his brother. I will tell Conrad that most of his problems began in childhood especially his relationship with his mother and that there is little he can do now to change that. When he complains of feeling depressed, anxious, and overcome by panic attacks, I let him know he has control over how he feels, thinks, and behaves. I help Conrad understand that his depression is the feeling part of his choice. I help him understand that he can begin to take different actions, which is likely to change his depressing experience. I will guide him towards a satisfying relationship and teach him more effective ways of behaving. The goal here is to help him eventually realize that he has a great deal of control over what he can do for himself.

Behavior therapy “focuses on directly observable behavior, current determinants of behavior, learning experiences that promote change, tailoring treatment strategies to individual clients, and rigorous assessment and evaluation” (Corey, 2015, p. 233). The emphasis of behavior therapy is on specific factors that influence present functioning and what factors can be used to modify performance (Corey, 2015, p. 237). Therefore “behavior therapists conduct a thorough functional assessment (or behavioral analysis)” (Corey, 2015, p. 237) by using the ABC model, to identify the “situational antecedents, the dimensions of the problem behavior, and the consequences of the problem” (Corey, 2015, p. 238). Since “the general goals of behavior therapy are to increase personal choice and to create new conditions for learning” (Corey, 2015, p. 238), behaviorally oriented practitioners tend to be active and directive and function as consultants and problem solvers (Corey, 2015, p. 238).

To begin Conrad’s therapy, I will conduct an assessment to determine the many specific and interrelated problems in Conrad’s case. Conrad is suicidal and displays problems such as anxiety, depression, fear of rejection, feeling worthless, isolated, and alienated. Further, Conrad has an unsatisfactory relationship with his parents particularly with his mother, has few friends, and feels socially inferior because of the guilt he carries. After completing this assessment, I will focus on helping Conrad define concrete and measurable goals and the specific areas where he would like to make changes. I will introduce Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) to help Conrad develop “self-compassion, which is a form of self-care when facing difficult situations” (Corey, 2015, p. 249). I will introduce “social skills training and self-management strategy to empower Conrad in learning more appropriate coping behaviors, eliminating unrealistic anxiety and guilt, and acquiring more adaptive responses” (Corey, 2015, p. 260). The goal is to help Conrad modify the behavior that results in his feelings of guilt and anxiety.

REBT is based on the premise that we learn irrational beliefs from significant others during childhood and then re-create these irrational beliefs throughout our lifetime (Corey, 2015, p. 272). We then “actively reinforce our self-defeating beliefs through the processes of autosuggestion and self-repetition”, (Corey, 2015, p. 272) and “behave in ways that are consistent with these beliefs” (Corey, 2015, p. 272). REBT is based on the assumption that cognitions, emotions, and behaviors interact significantly and have a reciprocal cause-and-effect relationship (Corey, 2015, p. 271). The A-B-C-D framework is “central to REBT theory and practice” (Corey, 2015, p. 273) and is a useful tool for understanding the client’s feelings, thoughts, events, and behavior (A. Ellis & Ellis, 2011 as cited in Corey, 2015, p. 273).

As Conrad’s therapist, my first step will be to show Conrad how he has “incorporated many irrational absolute “shoulds,” “oughts,” and “musts” into his thinking” (Corey, 2015) because of which he feels anxious, guilty and depressed. My second step will be to show Conrad how he is keeping his “emotional disturbances active by continuing to think illogically and unrealistically” (Corey, 2015). The third step will be to help Conrad “change his thinking and minimize his irrational ideas” (Corey, 2015). The fourth step will be to strongly encourage Conrad to “develop a rational philosophy of life so that in the future he can avoid hurting himself again by believing other irrational beliefs” (Corey, 2015). Conrad will be taught “skills that will give him the tools to identify and dispute irrational beliefs” (Corey, 2015). I will also ask Conrad to practice shame-attacking exercises which will help Conrad at “increasing self-acceptance” (Corey, 2015) and “thereby reduce, minimize, and prevent feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, and depression” (Corey, 2015). The basic aim of my therapy will be to teach Conrad “how to change his dysfunctional emotions and behaviors into healthy ones” (Corey, 2015).

A family systems perspective holds that individuals are best understood through assessing the interactions between and among family members (Corey, 2015, p. 404). It is within families, “we discover who we are; we develop and change; and we give and receive the support we need for survival” (Corey, 2015). We create, maintain, and live by often unspoken rules and routines that we hope will keep the family (and each of its members) functional (Corey, 2015, p. 404).

Systemic therapists do not deny the importance of the individual in the family system, but they believe an individual’s systemic affiliations and interactions have more power in the person’s life than a single therapist could ever hope to have (Corey, 2015, p. 406). Family therapy practitioners, therefore “call for a conceptual shift from evaluating individuals to focusing on system dynamics, or how individuals within a system react to one another” (Corey, 2015).

I as a systemic therapist will be interested to know whether and how Conrad’s family of origin has played a role in some of his symptoms of guilt, depression, and anxiety. To understand Conrad’s behavior, the initial conversation will involve the development of a genogram of Conrad’s family of origin. In the movie “Ordinary people” (Redford, 1980) it is obvious that Conrad’s parents have “not been a well-functioning team and both their spousal relationship, and their parenting has suffered” (Corey, 2015). Their dysfunctional relationship exhibited by suppressed feelings, dishonest communication, and an absence of healthy processing of pain and grieving has crept into Conrad’s relationship with his parents particularly his mother, and also played a role in the symptoms that he is exhibiting. Therefore, I will begin therapy with Conrad and invite Conrad’s mother and father into therapy with him. Further, the therapy will be structured around the goal to help Conrad’s parents have honest communication with one another and with Conrad and process their grief together as a family. This will ensure a healthy place for Conrad in the family, a better way of relating, and an ability to regain emotional health.

Females are raised in a culture grounded in sexism and understanding and acknowledging internalized oppression is central in feminist work (Corey, 2015, p. 342). "... Feminist theory is the first therapeutic theory to emerge from a collective effort by women..." (Corey, 2015), intending to "focus on understanding the social, political, and cultural forces in society that damage, oppress, and constrain girls and women, as well as boys and men" (Corey, 2015). According to Enns (2004), goals of feminist therapy include empowerment, valuing and affirming diversity, striving for change rather than adjustment, equality, balancing independence and interdependence, social change, and self-nurturance (Corey, 2015, p. 345). A related goal is to help individuals come together to strengthen collective power (Corey, 2015, p. 345). A distinctive feature of feminist therapy is the assumption that direct action for social change is one of the responsibilities of therapists (Corey, 2015, p. 343).

To begin with, I will treat Conrad as an equal, continually acknowledging that he is the expert of his life. My goal will be to empower Conrad while evoking his feminist consciousness. I will begin by asking Conrad to identify messages he has received growing up related to gender roles from his parents, teachers, the media, and peers. Conrad realizes that he has internalized these messages and therefore feels guilty, anxious, and depressed, often finding it difficult to sleep and feeling very hopeless. He finds it difficult to accept his brother's death and express his grief appropriately to his parents and peers. He feels hopeful because he realizes that there are alternatives to those parental and societal definitions and starts learning to value the nurturing and sensitive aspects of himself. He also begins to understand his parents' behavior in the context of societal expectations and stereotypes and stops blaming them. As Conrad learns to reframe his relationship with his mother, he develops a more realistic picture of her. He is learning to value the "feminine" as well as the "masculine" aspects of his personality.

References:

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